



## Catholic Social Thought and Human Dignity

Human creation in the “image and likeness of God” (*Genesis 1:26*)—the foundation for Catholic social thought (CST)—involves the dignity of the human person as found in various philosophies. But in CST, human dignity is incredibly elevated in that we humans are capable of intimate relationships with God and sanctified by Christ’s salvific grace. This transcendent dignity depends not on any accomplishment, education, wealth, race, or nation. It is not taken away by birth defect, disease, crime, poverty, or membership in any suspect group. Human dignity necessarily involves human life, rights, development, and empowerment.

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**Human life.** In *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), Saint John Paul II focused on the inviolability of human life and proclaimed a gospel of life over a culture of death [12].<sup>1</sup> The Pontiff argued that the right to life was the most basic human right [2]. Without defending the right to life, we cannot further the common good because it is the right to life “upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop” [101]. John Paul condemned murder [57], procured abortion [58], euthanasia [65], and capital punishment (except where the death penalty is the only way to defend society; but “such cases are very rare if not practically nonexistent” [56]).

**Human rights.** From human life and dignity, the CST tradition developed human rights, reaching a high point in affirming civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights in *Pacem in Terris* (1963) by Saint John XXIII. Rights actually give content to human dignity in relationship to persons, systems, and structures. Some rights protect human dignity “in its bodiliness: the right to life, bodily integrity, food, clothing, shelter, and some minimum degree of health care.”<sup>2</sup> Other rights relate to being able to work, free economic initiative, adequate

working conditions, and just wages.<sup>3</sup> Still others, such as the rights to assembly and association, defend our dignity in social interactions.<sup>4</sup>

**Integral human development.** In the context of the development of nations, Pope Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio* (1967) put forward a broad, complex, and demanding concept of development. Not just economic, development must be integral in two senses: the whole person and every person. Development engages the individual in personal responsibility for self-fulfillment. To achieve authentic development we must move “from less human conditions to those which are more human”: from material deprivation of life’s essentials, the moral deficiencies of selfishness, and oppressive social structures ... to the possession of necessities, knowledge, culture, respect for others’ dignity, cooperation, a desire for peace, and spiritual values [21].

**Empowerment.** Catholic thought has evolved from just protecting workers and the poor to promoting their empowerment as “artisans of their own destiny”<sup>5</sup>—individually, as workers and citizens, and as poor nations.

Empowerment is a process of engagement that increases the ability of individuals, families, organizations, and communities to build mutually respectful relationships and bring about fundamental, positive change in the conditions affecting their daily lives.<sup>6</sup>

This understanding stands on three principles: (1) people are the primary agents of change; (2) empowering changes happen through participative relationships; and (3) the human person is both social and spiritual; what affects one aspect of the person, affects the other.<sup>7</sup>

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Numbers in brackets refer to paragraphs in the respective documents.

<sup>2</sup> David Hollenbach, S.J., *Claims in Conflict: Retrieving and Renewing the Catholic Human Rights Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (1967), no. 65. Pope Benedict XVI deepened the concept of integral human development in *Caritas in Veritate* in 2009.

<sup>6</sup> A Catholic Charities Framework for Empowerment, Catholic Charities USA, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*